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ABSTRACT

Opinions of middle school students, called "transescents," were studied in an effort to provide feedback to adminstrators, parents, and teachers involved in program development in a school district with a K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 grade level configuration. Participants were 200 students from a school district in east central Michigan. A questionnaire was developed and administered to obtain information concerning transescents' physical, educational, social, and emotional needs. Findings revealed that females were more academically inclined than males. Both sexes seemed to enjoy physical education, with females' interest and participation declining considerably from fifth to eighth grade. Eating habits continuously changed, but the shift was more noticeable for females than males. A class in history and social studies was the least liked. Friendliness and understanding were qualities of favorite teachers. Having many good friends was considered important. Working in groups was favored. Parental influence declined while peer influence increased. The future was viewed positively. Teachers' role in non-academic areas diminished. Few subjects indicated that they sought advice or assistance from an adult significant other. Recommendations for educating transescents are offered. (RH)

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A SURVEY OF INTERESTS AND OPINIONS OF MIDDLE GRADES YOUNGSTERS

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It is widely accepted that middle grade youngsters (i.e., transescents) are a unique group; one that develops physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally at vastly different rates. In a day of microcomputers, video games, television, easy accessibility to controlled substances and the drug culture, AIDS, space travel and interplanetary voyages, terrorism, increased drop out rates, increased sexual activity, and on and on, transescents are growing up in a world that is extremely complex. As a result, they are maturing more rapidly than ever before, and are becoming more and more "worldly" wise. Compounded by their natural pubertal changes, transescents of today ask questions and have concerns for which there are no easy answers. Transescents are a frustrating (and often frustrated) group at a critical step in their development.

Since the sixties, there has been a continuous discussion in the literature (e.g., Eichhorn, 1966; Trump, 1967; Gatewood, 1973; DiVirgilio, 1973; Brooks 1978; Henson, 1986; Toepfer, 1986) about the need for a middle grade structure that will appropriately serve as a transition from elementary school to high school. In practice, however, the debate over to have (or not have) a middle "school" typically becomes a political decision (see LaCounte, 1986) that often has little to do with the needs of the young people who inhabit the grades. In addition, even in schools that are designed for the transescent (as documented by Martin, 1972; Goodlad, 1984; Arth, 1986; & the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) teachers often do not appropriately address the issues of transescence in ways that involve them in meaningful learning.

Many school districts change each year from junior high schools to middle schools or vice-versa (Arth, 1986). Unfortunately, the changes are often made without regard for the young people who inhabit those schools. In a society that is in constant flux, and requires a highly educated citizenry, school districts have a responsibility (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; New initiatives seek middle school reform, 1989) to begin paying attention to that age group. As America moves into the twenty-first century, middle grades youngsters need programs that conform to their needs.

This research, therefore, attempts to point out some of the physical, educational, social, and emotional needs of transescents in grades five, six, seven, and eight of a school district which is

adopting a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade level configuration. Specifically, the purpose is to gain an understanding of the opinions of the students in order to provide feedback to administrators, parents, and teachers involved in program development.

Methods

The sample for this study consists of two-hundred fifth-,sixth, seventh-, and eighth- graders from a medium-sized school district in east/central Michigan. The area is a typical cross-section of midwest America. The school district has six elementary schools (grades K-6), one junior high school (grades 7-9), and one high school (grades 10-12). In Fall, 1989, the junior high school will become a middle school (grades 6-8) and the ninth-grade will become part of the high school.

At the time of the study, the school district had a population of 238 fifth-grade students, 221 sixth-grade students, 237 seventh-grade students, and 261 eighth-grade students. All fifth-grade students and some sixth-grade students in the school district were housed in elementary schools. Most sixth-grade students, however, were housed in a separate wing of the junior high school, but were not permitted to "mix" with the seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade students. The sixth-graders as a result, were in self-contained classrooms and the "wing" operated in a manner that was similar to an elementary school setting. The seventh-and eighth-graders, on the other hand, were in a typical, departmentalized, junior high school setting. Twenty-five males and twenty-five females were randomly selected from each of the four grade levels.

To gather the data, a questionnaire (see Appendix) was generated by the researchers. After the questionnaire was constructed, it was reviewed with the superintendent, principals, and several teachers. Any unclear items were clarified; any objectionable items were omitted. Although some statements on the survey perhaps should be clarified further, the survey was considered adequate for the purposes of the study.

Before administering the survey, a letter of consent was sent home with each student selected for the study. The letter explained the purpose for gathering the information and how/why the particular

student was selected to participate. Parents/guardians were asked to give their consent or withhold their consent by signing the letter in the appropriate place, and returning it to the school. Ten parents refused to allow their youngsters to participate, and these students were subsequently dropped from the study. As a result 190 students, of the original 200 students selected, completed the surveys.

The surveys were administered to the fifth- and sixth-grade students by their teachers in their classrooms. The seventh- and eighth-grade students completed the surveys in their assigned homerooms.

Results

Physical Dimension

In the physical dimension (Part I of the Survey) we were interested in determining what kind of energy these youngsters had (i.e., did school tire them out?), what kind of eating habits they had (e.g., did what they learn about proper nutrition carry over into their daily lives?), and their interest in activity classes (e.g., did they participate in "gym" class?).

Responses in the physical dimension indicated that both males and females seldom got tired during the school day, but had high energy levels. At least 80% of the males in grades 5-8 said they participated in the gym class, and at least 75% of the females in grades 5-7 said they participated. Level of participation for females fell dramatically in eighth-grade, however, where under 60% said they participated in gym class.

Concerning eating habits, responses for both males and females showed a continuous decline in practicing proper nutrition from fifth-grade to eighth-grade. Fifth-graders said that they ate breakfast before coming to school, and were hungry when they arrived home from school; eighth-graders indicated the opposite. This was interesting in that although most students participated in the gym class, there seemed to be little carryover to their lives in terms of nutritional habits. Either that class (or some other class) was not emphasizing proper nutrition or was not emphasizing it appropriately. The change in eating habits, however, could also be explained by a change in patterns of responsibility.

In fifth- (and sixth-) grades, for example, parents could be monitoring behavior more closely, but by seventh-grade and into eighth-grade parents began to relinquish some of that monitoring as young people wanted more independence. Two other possible explanations could be 1) eating "junk" foods on the way home from school (perhaps there should have been a question about this) and 2) the desire to stay thin, especially by females (more females than males, for example, indicated not being hungry or not eating).

Education Dimension

In the education dimension (Part II of the Survey), we wanted to determine which classes the youngsters liked best and which they liked least; also, we wanted to determine the attributes of their most favorite (and least favorite) teachers.

Analysis of the responses to the education portion of the survey indicated that students overwhelmingly chose Physical Education (or "gym" class) as their favorite class, while History/Social Studies was their least favorite class. Mathematics ranked second in both popularity and unpopularity. Apparently, the respondents either liked Mathematics or did not like it as there was almost an even split between liking and not liking.

For the balance of the classes (i.e., Art, English, Music, Reading, and Science), respondents did not appear to have a great deal of preference either way in terms of liking them or not liking them. Of Art, English, Music, Reading, and Science, English was the most-liked class; none, however, seemed to excite many students.

Of all the classes, the females chose academic classes (i.e., English, History, Social Studies, Mathematics, or Science) as their favorite classes more often than did the males. When males selected an academic class as their favorite class, it was usually either Mathematics or Science.

Relative to teachers, respondents as a group said that the best qualities of their favorite teachers were being 1) friendly, 2) understanding, and 3) well-organized. Qualities of the respondents' least favorite teachers, on the other hand, were being 1) not understanding, 2) rude, and 3) easy. The males seemed to like teachers who were friendly, understanding, and well-organized. Females seemed

to like teachers who were friendly and not "too" easy, but did not necessarily want them to be understanding.

Social/Emotional Dimension

In the social/emotional dimension (Part III of the survey), we wanted to determine the groups' relationships with their parents, friends, and teachers, their comfort zones relative to displaying their feelings, and how positive they were about their futures.

Responses indicated that all subjects had 1) a need for "many" close friends, that 2) they enjoyed group activities (both in and out of school), and that 3) it did not make a difference if the groups had a male/female mixture or were all male or all female. Interestingly, the females indicated a preference for single-sex groups more often than did the males. Also, interestingly (perhaps), the females indicated that they were much more uncomfortable when seen in public by their friends, if the females were with their parents.

Concerning pubertal development, both sexes said they discussed body changes with their parents, but discussed boyfriend/girlfriend relationships and wardrobe with their friends.

Problems in school were discussed with parents and (perhaps) a teacher. Teachers, however, except for academic issues, appeared to take a considerably diminished role in the social/emotional realm.

As a group, totally and separately, the subjects indicated that they generally did not show emotions by crying, but females indicated that they would show emotions in this way much more often than did males. Subjects indicated that when they were upset they would talk to the person or seek advice from one of their parents first before talking to another friend (or friends) about the problem. The fifth- and sixth-graders indicated they would talk to the person or seek advice from a parent. Seventh- and eighth-graders, on the other hand, would talk to the person or one of their friends before seeking advice from a parent. Curiously, very few of the students in the sample (less than 10%) indicated that they would turn to a significant "other" adult to seek information or guidance.

The majority of students (58%) believed they could do something in their futures to make the

world a better place. A considerable number (42%), however, indicated that they either could not do something in the future to make the world a better place or were not sure if they could.

Conclusions

Basically, the survey results were consistent with accepted literature about transescent and early adolescent development.

The results pointed out that females were more academically inclined than the males. The females, for example, usually selected academic classes as their favorite classes; males, except for mathematics or science, generally did not.

Both sexes seemed to enjoy physical education ("gym" was the most "popular" class selected in the survey). This could mean that the sample for this study preferred kinesthetic activities. There was no clear preference, however, for other kinesthetic-type classes (e.g. music or art), and, also, the females' interest and participation in physical education declined considerably from fifth-grade to eight-grade. The decline was most apparent after seventh-grade.

There was a continuous shift in eating habits displayed, but the shift was more noticeable for females than males. Females indicated being hungry and eating less often than did males.

The least liked class was history/social studies. Subjects were mixed in their like/dislike for mathematics, and seemed to not have a strong opinion (interest?) about the other classes.

Predictably, "friendliness" and "understanding" were qualities of favorite teachers, and "lack of understanding" and "rudeness" were qualities of least favorite teachers. Males seemed to like teachers who were "structured," while females wanted teachers who were "easy", but not "too" easy.

Socially, a group consciousness was displayed (which could have been anticipated). For example, it was more important to have many good friends as opposed to a few good friends. Also, most students were in favor of working with groups on school projects, and seemed not to be bothered by working with members of the opposite sex. The preference of these youngsters for group interaction could also explain the selection of "gym" as the most popular class. Physical education classes tend

to be structured in groups which allow for more informal interactions during class than do most other classes. Also, "gym" allows for a structured competitiveness which transescents seem to enjoy and other activity classes may lack.

Parental influence seemed to decline from fifth-grade to eighth-grade. As students matured, parents had less importance than peers. Interestingly, however, the survey showed that for this group both sexes overwhelmingly claimed that they discussed pubertal changes with their parents. Peers, however, were chosen first for discussion of interpersonal relationships, appropriate attire (especially for females), and leisure time activities.

The subjects in the survey preferred not to show their emotions, especially before their peers. Females, however, indicated that they were more secure being "emotional" than did boys.

As a group, the subjects had a positive view of their futures. There was a large group, however, especially in the sixth-and seventh-grades, which seemed skeptical and uncertain about their futures.

The subjects' teachers, except for assistance with assignments, held a considerably diminished role in realms other than the educational. Interestingly, few subjects indicated seeking advice or assistance from a significant "other" adult.

Some Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are suggested:

* Since young people in this age range enjoy interaction, classes need to be structured around cooperative learning groups. Transescents are very social beings and will talk, regardless, so it makes sense that teachers develop situations where these young people can talk and learn at the same time.
* Since the transescents in this study selected physical education as their favorite class, it would be a good idea to find out what it is they like about the class (beyond the activities involved). Also, it seems that the physical education teachers need to develop ways 1) of getting the

females more involved in the class, and 2) of getting the transescents (females especially) to carry proper nutritional habits into their daily living since this age range is often the beginning of eating disorders.

* Teachers should evaluate their instructional strategies to include more variety (e.g., simulations and educational games). Goodlad (1984) points out that by fifth- or sixth-grade students spend less and less time engaged in a variety of imaginative activities, especially in the academic classes. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) and the National Council for the Social Studies (1989) also support this contention.
* Classes should be energetic, process-oriented places that get students involved in real applications to life rather than the textbook/worksheet, product-oriented places that are most common.
* Transescents need an open, accepting atmosphere, where they have time to talk and reach decisions about current and future issues that are relevant to them.
* Transescents need to believe that they are involved in the decisions made for them in school.
* Teachers need to spend more time listening to and talking to transescents so that the youngsters will feel more comfortable talking to them about problems beyond school problems. Transescents need adults who support them in ways that are receptive and nonthreatening.
* Teachers (as suggested also by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) need to have a strong understanding of the constantly changing nature of middle school youngsters. Further, teachers need a regularly scheduled time to talk about what they are doing and to hear what others are doing.
* School districts (as suggested by the Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development, 1989, and Able and Sparapani, 1988) need to hire teachers who are trained to work with transescents, and also who want to work with transescents.
* The school needs to communicate regularly (i.e., at least monthly) with parents through a variety of media, and to get them involved in the school on a regular basis.

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APPENDIX

MIDDLE SCHOOL SURVEY

Please fill in the following information by circling the correct response next to each of the items:

Gender: Male Female

Grade: 5 6 7 8

Age: 10 11 12 13 14 15

Month of Birth: Jan. Feb March April May June
July Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec

Part I - please circle one response to the right of each question which is the best answer for you:

1)	Are you often tired?	always	very often	often	not often	never
2)	How often do you take a nap?	always	very often	often	not often	never
3)	Do you participate in gym class?	always	very often	often	not often	never
4)	Do you feel restless in school?	always	very often	often	not often	never
5)	Are you hungry when you get home from school?	always	very often	often	not often	never
6)	Do you eat breakfast before school?	always	very often	often	not often	never

Part II. Please circle one response under each question which is the best answer for you:

1) What subject do you like best to study in School?

GYM SOCIAL STUDIES MATH ENGLISH HISTORY READING SCIENCE ART MUSIC

2) What subject do you least like to study in school?

GYM SOCIAL STUDIES MATH ENGLISH HISTORY READING SCIENCE ART MUSIC

3) What would you change about school if you could?

MORE GYM SHORTER DAY OTHER _____

4) What in your opinion is the best quality about your favorite teacher?

FRIENDLY WELL-ORGANIZED UNDERSTANDING STRICT OTHER_____

5) What in your opinion is the worst quality of your least favorite teacher?

RUDE UNPREPARED NOT UNDERSTANDING TOO EASY OTHER _____

Part III. Please circle one response to the right of each question which is the best answer for you: Answer SA for strongly agree, A for agree, D for disagree, and SD for strongly disagree.

1)	It is better to have many good friends than just a few good friends.	SA	A	D	SD
2)	It is better to work in groups than alone on a school project.	SA	A	D	SD
3)	It is embarrassing to be seen by my friends at the mall with my parents.	SA	A	D	SD
4)	It is cool to accept an invitation to a boy-girl party.	SA	A	D	SD
5)	I am comfortable working on a school project with a member of the opposite sex.	SA	A	D	SD

Part IV - Answer the following items:

1) Do you hold back tears when you feel like crying when you are with your friends? __ yes __ no

2) If you have a problem listed below who do you speak to about it?

Please circle P for parents, F for friends, T for teacher, and OA for other adult:

a)	body changes	P	F	T	OA
b)	boyfriend-girlfriend relationships	P	F	T	OA
c)	trouble at school	P	F	T	OA
d)	what clothes are cool to wear	P	F	T	OA
e)	a math problem	P	F	T	OA

3) When you are with your friends and you are hurt or angry, how do you handle these feelings?

Please check <u>one</u> response best for you.

___ talk over with friends

___ cry

___ seek advice from friends

___ seek advice from parents

___ seek advice from another adult

4) When you are ten years older than you are now, do you feel you can do something to make this world a little better place to live?

___ yes ___ no